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Special issue: The practice of policy making

Editorial: The practice of policy making

Evidence, policy - and practice

From its inception, this journal has been concerned with connections between evidence, policy and practice. The decision to devote a section of the journal to practice reflected an interest in the nature of practice and a desire to encourage practitioner and practitioner focused contributions. Over time the practice section has included contributions from practitioners (Davies 2010), papers exploring the role of practitioners seeking to promote the use of evidence in practice through initiatives such as knowledge brokering (Knight and Lightowler 2010), and research focusing on practice (Stevens et al 2009). This special issue provides an opportunity to focus specifically on a further interesting and underexplored dimension: the practice of policy making. It is hoped that this issue will stimulate future contributions and enrich debates about the nature and meaning of practice in relation to evidence and policy.

The papers in this special issue began life as contributions to an ESRC funded seminar series entitled 'Policy as Practice: Understanding the work of policy makers'¹. The series promoted and facilitated exchange and debate of ideas about the practice of policy making. Seeing policy as practice, it was guided by a set of fundamental questions about policy making and policy research, including: What is policy? What do policy makers do when they go to work? What kinds of activity does policy making entail? How is what policy makers do represented in the accounts that researchers and practitioners themselves respectively give of it? In addressing such neglected questions, the series set out to challenge the taken for granted assumptions of both researchers and practitioners in the field. The programme covered four topics:

1. *The elements of practice.*
2. *Accounts of practice.*
3. *Theorising practice.*
4. *Analysing practice.*

Readers of this journal understand very well the problematic nature of evidence, the uncertain status of policy and the difficulty of establishing any coherent and consistent relationship between the two. What should count as evidence, and how should it inform policy? Who makes policy, and on what authority? Part of the problem of this relationship between evidence and policy, it is argued here, is their implicit relationship to practice.

¹ ESRC award no. RES-451-26-0613.

For both evidence and policy - separately and together - derive meaning from an implied other, third term: that of practice. Evidence may be derived from practice or may be designed to inform it; it is often most significant when it contradicts it. The purpose of policy, similarly, is to shape and order practice, and evidence is one of the ways it finds of doing so. In this way, each term makes sense only in relation to a shared antonym, that of practice. And even when evidence and policy converge and coincide, there remains a residual order of practice, the unruly and elusive world in which things really happen, ordered but only partly so by evidence and policy.

In much of the literature, and often in the pages of this journal, 'practice' serves as something of a cipher. It stands for what happens after policy, as evidence is deployed by front-line staff such as social workers, teachers, doctors and nurses. Our purpose here, in this special issue, is to make explicit this domain of practice, to define it and to indicate different ways of exploring it. To the extent that evidence and policy are unthinkable without a concept of practice, we offer ways of thinking about them again.

The immediate prompts for this work are empirical, and they are twofold. The first, as Henk Wagenaar (2004) has noted, is that we know surprisingly little of what those we call 'policy makers' actually do when they are doing their job. We know about policy as an abstraction, separate from the everyday activities of human beings who conceive it, compete and collaborate over it and carry it out. With some few exceptions, we think of the policy process in terms of patterns and models rather than simply as work (Colebatch 2006). Secondly, we know something of the instruments of policy making (Hood 1983), but more of their purposes and effects than the way they are designed and used. We distinguish between policy and practice, between policy makers and practitioners, as though policy makers themselves weren't also practitioners of a special kind. The world of policy making, we contend here, is itself a realm of practice as well as of ideas, interests and institutions.

From this largely academic perspective, practice seems strangely new, unexplored territory. But it is terrain which is being closely mapped by others. The work of public officials, professionals and practitioners of all kinds is increasingly measured and monitored - and not least according to systems of self-regulation by those practitioners themselves. Much of the evidence with which policy is concerned is evidence of the due performance of tasks. In this way, the practice of government, to a very great extent, has become the government of practice. And whether new forms of regulation are to be promoted or resisted, doing so will turn on an effective understanding of the nature of practice. But what do we mean by 'practice'?

What is practice?

In taking practice as a theme or framework for policy studies we have wanted to begin again, somewhere new. Here, we develop a conception of practices as specific configurations of action, norms and knowledge.²

Practice as action

² Our thinking about practice comes from our reading of more extended introductions by Schatzki (2001) and Wagenaar and Cook (2003), among others.

Practices are actions: they seem to consist in people doing things. Action of this kind is both social and material. Note that the meaning of a given behaviour is necessarily socially derived: practices are very often carried out with others, and by reference to norms and standards which others, both participant and non-participant, will recognize. We cannot properly think of action as individual ('individual action'); meaningful action is always socially informed, such that all action – and all practice – is to some extent interaction.

While practices amount to 'people doing things', they do them with other real things, that is with objects, tools, instruments and artefacts: the practitioner 'converses with materials', as Schön and Rein have it (1994; Wagenaar and Cook 2003, p 141). So artefacts and practices, like actions and practices, entail each other, are mutually constitutive. Practices generate artefacts, which in turn structure practices. The artefact serves as an embodiment of practice which makes that practice knowable by others, repeatable over time. It seems to hold things together. Indeed, it may be that the very existence of the object, its normal presence, leads actors to act on, with, through or around it: the artefact *requires* the practice, which in turn requires the artefact, of course.

Practice as norms

Such sets or sequences of action acquire the status of practice through repetition. For a practice to be recognized as such, it must be capable of being interpreted and understood (and invariably judged) by like practitioners. It is for this reason that we speak of 'normal practice' and, increasingly, 'best practice' (though we can recognize, too, the difference between normal practice and actual practice). What is right is a matter of judgment for all concerned, made according to some formally stated procedure perhaps, but also according to the precedent of previous, similar exercises.

At the same time, however, practice is always improvised: the practitioner rehearses and reinvents his or her practice in respect of each new client, each new situation and each new set of circumstances. What is right in respect of a planning consultation is also a matter of what is right for *this* particular issue in *these* specific circumstances. Each instance of a practice is carried out, in Garfinkel's phrase, for 'another first time'. In this way, practice maintains a tension between repetition and innovation, and this is partly why practice itself is so difficult to define: practices are essentially underdetermined, only partly defined by reference to previous practice or prevailing norms.

Practice as knowledge

Practice is thoughtful, learned and remembered action. Practices are particular sets of actions that both entail and reproduce particular knowledge of when and how they are to be performed. In this sense, all practice is somehow 'expert'. By the same token, practice must be learned, often through experience and usually from like practitioners (Wenger 1998). This is why an element of placement study or apprenticeship is deemed essential to professional training; it is also why occupations with little or no formal training may nevertheless be highly skilled. Practitioners work according to norms or principles they know but might find difficult to articulate, making pragmatic judgments according to what they know in turn of planning guidelines, previous

consultations, immediate circumstance and, indeed, of each other.

So where does this take us? To the extent that practice is individual, institutional, and knowing it is also collective, contingent and innocent. But practice in practice, so to speak, is likely something else again. It is a compound, not a mixture; its properties will be different to those of its components. The very concept of practice is an abstraction, a heuristic, an inevitable misrepresentation of what is endlessly empirical, particular, grounded, local and specific. It is useful now – here, in policy studies – precisely because it problematizes what have become the ordinary dimensions of our thought – and practice. So we might think of practice in the way Annelise Riles thinks of more generally of ethnography, as 'a theoretically sophisticated antidote to the excesses of theory' (2006, p 1).

Theory and practice

Talk of the 'practice turn' in policy studies often masks a multitude of approaches to the empirical study of policy practices. Much ink has indeed been spilled in attempts to map the complex field of practice theory, leading many observers to the inescapable conclusion that it is best understood as a 'family of related meanings' (Wagenaar and Cook 2003). So when we speak of how we might begin to understand the contribution of practice to the critical explanation of policy processes, it is only right to keep in mind the plurality of turns to practice. This recognition militates against drawing hard-and-fast boundaries between practice and other 'turns' in policy analysis (see, in particular, appeals to the 'argumentative turn', the 'discursive turn' and the 'institutional turn'). At the same time, it brings to the fore the multiple rationales for examining the everyday activities of practitioners, policymakers, planners, consultants, politicians and others who are engaged collectively in policy making.

In fact, one of the starting points for this special issue was, as we remarked above, a shared concern that we know little of the everyday activity of policy makers. Engaging in studies of practice begins to address this gap in our empirical knowledge. As such, practice-based inquiries which strive for a 'fuller picture' of policy-making act as a supplement to existing accounts of policy processes. Asking about practice draws our attention back to the complex 'messiness' of policymaking, of the twists and turns by which policy is ultimately produced and performed. It counters top-down, macro-explanations of policy which typically appeal to grand narratives of change, locking policymakers into predictable path dependencies or overarching economic, political and social constraints. It renews a focus on the bottom-up translations of policy initiatives by local actors, providing alternative ways of explaining local diversity or differential outcomes. In this way, the study of practice builds on a tradition of studies of 'street-level bureaucracy' (Lipsky 1980) and the blurring of formulation and implementation. It returns us to Dunleavy's assertion that much of policy, in the end, is 'what professionals do in the field' (Dunleavy 1981).

But it would be wrong of us to interpret the turn to practice as little more than a call for a reframing of the politics of implementation. As the contributions to this volume demonstrate, there is no privileged space 'beyond policy' for the study of practice. Practice is not simply confined to local actors operating at the frontline of the delivery

of public services. Rather, practice inquiry can inform studies of national and international as well as local organisations, both in the public and private domain. It can enhance our understanding of the roles of civil servants, professionals and politicians, be it through analysis of the practices of drafting legislation, the daily routines of parliament or the work of international consultants. Our point here is to recognise the multiple and overlapping spaces within which policy is produced, acknowledging the situated or contextualised nature of policy-making. A critical explanation of policy practices cannot ignore the multiple spaces within which they are entangled (Howarth and Griggs 2011).

In this way, moves to the study of practice, even those intent on no more than supplementing existing accounts, start to reconfigure our understandings of the policy process. Like all forms of inquiry, practice brings with it its own set of theoretical assumptions and implications. Primarily, attending to practice makes for a rediscovery of agency, albeit without the individualist, essentialist and rationalist preconceptions of rational choice theory. We should note that practice is purposive, and that it is also reasonable, in the sense of being both reasoned and explicable. But note, too, that it is invariably carried out in conjunction and collaboration with others, in ways that are familiar to and warranted by others. This is why we speak of 'practitioners', seeming to mean sets of individuals in interaction with others. At the same time, practice opens up the prospect of a 'thicker' account of agency, one which foregrounds the social, meaningful and affective dimension of practices, and the ways in which different identities, beliefs and values come to play a role in explanations of particular ways of doing things.

If the multiple turns to practice thus begin to reconfigure our understandings of agency, the logic of a practice approach equally heightens our awareness of the often unexplored elements of policy. Practices are relational; they articulate or 'order' the complex webs of routines and roles of individuals, as well as the different objects, artefacts and elements that together produce policy. In other words, practices are constitutive, for they bring into being and give meaning to the roles, objects and artefacts that go to 'make' policy. Let us briefly consider, for example, the practices surrounding the daily performance of a meeting (Freeman 2008). Such practices bring together not simply the collection of codes and norms determining behaviour in discussions and the role of the chair, but also the work of agenda items, briefings and minutes as well as the physical arrangement of a room, the backstage conversations which take place before and after the business of the meeting itself, and so on (Wodak 2009). In this way, in turning to practice, we not only offer new insights into the micro-practices of individuals, we also start to widen our understandings of what comprises policy, turning our attention to what Thrift (2008) calls its 'mundane' materials. In recognizing such theoretical possibilities, we begin to develop new readings of the policy process, including constructivist approaches which privilege the constitutive dimension of practices and their role in 'ordering' policy making (Gottweis 2003).

While reinventing agency, so to speak, practices also beg new questions of institutions. For practices are routine, rehearsed, capable of repetition: they have some of the characteristics of institutions. Indeed, this is what makes them recognisable as practices. But practice also acknowledges the contingency and instability that inhabits policy-making. In other words, we might think of a practice

as the enactment of an institution, drawing analogies with music or sport, in which every game is different, each performance is new. To the extent that the study of practice picks up institutionalist precepts, it does so only to concern itself with the disaggregation and contextualization of institutional processes, with understanding the contingency of institutions.

And this is where we bring politics back in. For 'practice' undermines managerial or technical understandings of the policy process. In their ordering of what constitutes policy, practices define boundaries and hence exclusions between insiders and outsiders. Practice cannot be divorced from the exercise of power. It is inherently political, such that the taken-for-granted institutional neutrality of policy practices such as meetings cannot and should not mask their political origins and their reproduction of particular exclusions.

Key messages from the papers

Given the embryonic field - new at least in its application to matters of politics and public policy - all of the authors find it necessary to do some definitional work, identifying different schools and traditions of thought about practice. All make reference to the variety and multiplicity of approaches to practice and, taken together, go on to exemplify it. In each case, too, practice is the object both of fundamental philosophizing and of intensive and often innovative empirical investigation. It is this rich combination that makes the problematic of practice potentially so exciting.

In the first paper, Tanja Pritzlaff and Frank Nullmeier set off in search of the atom, taking practice as the irreducible element of the social and political process. In respect of policy making, they find it in the moment of political decision, the point at which 'collectively binding obligation' is produced and affirmed. Wanting to capture practice both conceptually and empirically, they locate decision making somewhere between an action and institution, and composed of a sequence of recognizable acts or moves: proposal, acceptance and confirmation. These are made in immediate face-to-face interaction, typically in the course of a meeting. Though individual acts may be made by individual actors, they are meaningful only as the work of the group. In turn, their empirical investigation of a federal committee indicates that the practice of decision making is sustained by sub-political practices of translation or reformulation, repair, re-narration and authorization as the substance of a claim is processed.

To remain binding (not only on the parties to a decision but also on others affected by it or to whom it is addressed) what is agreed must be recorded. What is said is written down, what is decided is also documented. In the second paper, Richard Freeman and Jo Maybin examine the document as a point of orientation for practice, shifting our methodological focus from the interaction of practice to the artefact around which it is organized. There is a strong tradition of paying attention to the content of policy documents - for it is there that evidence and its truths are stated, problems articulated and positions drawn - but they have taken much less note of the process by which the document is made and used. A notable characteristic of the policy document is that it is written and read by groups. Its material quality is what makes policy possible. The document fixes decisions and instructions, making them both stable and mobile. It forms the basic technology of government, of action both at a distance and over time.

In the third paper, Christian Bueger looks at the ways in which practices are aggregated into modes of governing. Proceeding from a simple observation that 'there are different activity systems comprised of agents, practices and material arrangements by which politics is practised' [p8], he sets out a typology of five proposed by Bruno Latour. They comprise our everyday understanding of the politics of interests and authority, or *sovereignty*; *deliberation* in conferences and assemblies; the *governmentality* of bureaucratic regulation and monitoring; *inquiry* and problem-solving, and the *laboratory* of scientific and technological innovation. They draw attention, importantly, to the different spaces of political practice. Bueger's place or site of investigation is the UN's Peacebuilding Commission, reminding us of the elision of micro and macro to be made in focusing on practice: the international is a locus of practice just as much as the regional and local. And what is interesting about the Commission is the simultaneous operation of different modes of governing, sometimes in complementary ways, sometimes in parallel and sometimes in ways which conflict. He illustrates how practices can become barriers to action as well as ways of doing things.

The fourth paper by Henk Wagenaar and Noam Cook takes us back to a local office, to experience what they consider to be the 'conspicuously ordinary'. Two police officers wonder what to do with a case; Wagenaar and Cook wonder about their wondering. For what they (the police officers) are wondering about is how to relate the information they have to what is happening, how to connect knowledge to context. That they are able to do so at all is a function of their experience: it is experience that 'animates the relationship between practice, knowledge and context' [p2]. Using the work of Japanese philosopher Nishida Kitaro, Wagenaar and Cook distil 'experience' into different aspects of 'actionable understanding', 'ongoing business' and the 'unfolding present'. The effect is to place practice as prior to both knowledge and context: practice generates, endogenously rather than exogenously, so to speak, the knowledge it requires to go on.

Steven Griggs and David Howarth argue in the fifth paper that practice belongs to the realm of discourse. Discourse theory is an important critical resource which allows us to understand what we do. But what is discourse? How is practice constituted 'discursively', and how might we begin to research it in that way? They show how the Well Being Power, introduced in enabling legislation in 2000 which entitled local authorities to undertake action of any kind to promote the social, economic and environmental well-being of their area, was interpreted by policy makers and practitioners in myriad ways. In doing so, they explain not only how practice might be understood as discourse, but how discourse is reconstituted in practice. They conclude by developing a set of precepts by which this process might be interrogated, offering practice up to discourse only to reclaim it as a site of struggle.

Concluding remarks

Offering up policy practice as an autonomous if not a priori category of social action, this special issue begins to collapse the boundaries between 'thinking and action' that underpin modernist accounts of policy-making and current distinctions between policy and practice. It turns on its head the distinction between formulation and implementation, offering new inroads for example into the study of strategy which begin to focus upon its emergent qualities, the importance of learning and the flaw of

distinctions between cognition and action. At the same time, it calls for a new way of thinking about research and the generation of evidence. It directs us to the rediscovery of the value and benefits of empirically-driven 'thick descriptive' case studies, obliging researchers to engage with what practitioners actually do. In generating such cases, we can begin to build up alternative sources of evidence, privileging studies that build upon practical wisdom or judgment rather than the development of law-like explanations and predication, all designed to enhance our technical control of the world (Flyvbjerg 2001).

This is a departure from recent fashions in policy analysis. On the one hand, it holds out the prospect of developing policy models that speak to the daily activities of policymakers. On the other hand, it might just further transform our understanding of practitioners into that of collaborative partners for innovation and improvisation within the policy process (Laws and Hajer 2006), allowing us to capture what Newman (2010) has characterized as the capacity of practitioners to engage in 'creative destruction'. Ultimately, the study of policy practice might therefore finally begin to move us away from new public management accounts of practitioners as game-players or as instrumental agents seeking to defect from external regulation towards an appreciation of policy practice as an active ingredient in the heady compound that is policy making.

Richard Freeman, Steven Griggs and Annette Boaz

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